Shadow, Gender, Transference: Alfred Wolfsohn in Charlotte Salomon's Life? or Theater?

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Shadow, Gender, Transference: Alfred Wolfsohn in
Charlotte Salomon’s *Life? or Theater?*

Natalie Marie Vaieland

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Charlotte Salomon’s Life? or Theater? is a complex compilation of painting, musical notations, autobiography, cinematic layouts, and literary text. Salomon scholars have neglected a crucial element of Life? or Theater?, which is the significant influence of Salomon’s friend, Alfred Wolfsohn. This thesis fills this void by examining the correlation between stylistic influences in Salomon’s work and by exploring Wolfsohn’s theoretical practices. Using a framework informed by Jungian psychology and Wolfsohn’s extensive music theory, this thesis argues that Salomon portrayed her own story via Wolfsohn’s philosophy of catharsis. As trauma became a reoccurring theme in Salomon’s life, painting and creation became her purification and the means by which she recovered her own sanity.

To expound the importance of Salomon’s emotional expulsion in Life? or Theater?, this thesis considers her biography, traumatic life events, and her formal art training at the Vereinigte Staatsschulen für Freie und Angewandte Kunst. The combination of her chaotic life events, her training as a visual artist, and her inclusion of musical and theatrical elements emphasize her ability to efficiently call upon the most effective and expressive artistic style for her catharsis. In its synthesis, Salomon’s Life? or Theater? becomes a Gesamtkunstwerk that is the pinnacle of German Expressionism.

Lastly, this thesis will look to the relationship and influence of Wolfsohn. Arguing that Wolfsohn’s influence was more than encouraging Salomon to paint, this thesis will draw connections between Wolfsohn’s theories and Salomon’s approach to Life? or Theater?. In arguing for the importance of Wolfsohn’s theories, and by understanding her work as catharsis via Gesamtkunstwerk, this thesis has contributed new ways of understanding Salomon’s complex work, Life? or Theater?, as more than an illustrated autobiography.

Keywords: Charlotte Salomon, Alfred Wolfsohn, Life or Theater?, Gesamtkunstwerk, German Expressionism, Vereinigte Staatsschulen für Freie und Angewandte Kunst
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I would like to thank the Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam for access to primary sources and a vast collection of research materials on Charlotte Salomon. In addition, I am appreciative to the many scholars, namely Griselda Pollock and Monica Bohm-Duchen, who have studied and written about the life and the art of Salomon, who have provided resources, and who have offered moving insights into her complex life and works.
DEDICATION

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Introduction

For Charlotte Salomon, painting was more than a hobby or a simple professional endeavor. It was a method of deep catharsis by which she began to understand family secrets, process sexual assault, and achieve self-realization. Between June of 1940 and the autumn of 1942, Salomon feverishly created some thirteen-hundred gouache paintings.1 Her semi-autobiographical compilation, entitled Leben? oder Theater?: Ein Singspiel (Life? or Theater?), is a coming-of-age account that incorporates secrets of familial suicide and her love affair with prominent vocal coach, Alfred Wolfsohn, in an effort to reconcile the emotional trauma of her youth.2 Salomon created Life? or Theater? using her art training from the Vereinigte Staatsschulen für Freie und Angewandte Kunst, with stylistic influences of the German Expressionists and the Gesamtkunstwerk, and by the practical application of Wolfsohn’s theory. This thesis argues that Wolfsohn was more than an encouraging voice; his theories became an essential part of Salomon’s creative catharsis.

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1 Griselda Pollock, “Nameless Before the Concentrationary Void: Charlotte Salomon’s Leben? Oder Theater? 1942-1942 ‘After Gurs,’” in Concentrationary Memories: Totalitarian Terror and Cultural Resistance, edited by Griselda Pollock and Max Silverman (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2014), 159. Pollock notes that although Salomon painted well over one thousand gouache images, she only used 796 paintings within the final product of Leben? oder Theater? The others remain as transparent overlays or images which were crossed out by Salomons’s hand. The pages were never bound.

2 “Charlotte Salomon: Leben? oder Theater?, The Complete Collection,” Jewish Historical Museum, last modified 2009, accessed June 6, 2015, http://www.jhm.nl/collection/specials/charlotte-salomon. The Jewish Historical Museum currently owns and archives Salomon’s extensive work. The museum does not currently (as of July 24, 2015) have any of these works on display as part of their permanent collection. However, the website listed above contains the images from Leben? oder Theater? as well as the accompanying translated texts, transparent overlays, and musical notations. The electronic format effectively aids in understanding the complexity of Salomon’s work—minus any tactile interaction, of course. The Jewish Historical Museum Research Center houses the most complete collection of scholarship on Salomon in articles, books, films, sheet music, photographic materials, an index of theatrical productions, and exhibition guides. For a complete collection of gouache paintings of Leben? oder Theater? in print see: Charlotte Salomon, Charlotte: Life or Theater?: An Autobiographical Play by Charlotte Salomon, trans. Leila Vennewitz (New York: The Viking Press, 1981). Charlotte: Life or Theater? is a near complete compilation of Salomon’s gouache paintings. The only element missing in the publication is the transparent overlays. However, the text contained on these see-through pages is printed next the corresponding images.
Previous scholarship surrounding *Life? or Theater?* has been heavily focused on the biographical aspects of Salomon’s life, the life she portrayed in paint, and her preoccupation with suicide.³ It has been argued that the psychology of suicide is conveyed via Salomon’s working techniques and her compulsive nature of painting. Thence, psychoanalytical approaches to Salomon’s work dwell on aspects of hysteria and insanity in *Life? or Theater?*, and on her presumed madness as a female artist. Arguments presented by theorist Griselda Pollock, and historian Michael P. Steinberg link her obsessive brushstrokes, layout, and her subject matter to an uncontrollable madness stemming from within; a psychosis which Salomon yearned to tame when she put emotional rashness onto paper. Furthermore, literary theorist Ernest van Alphen argued that Salomon’s physical act of painting was a meditative practice and that the focus of suicide was an access point in which Salomon was able to more fully explore her inner-self in order to find sanity.⁴ Moreover, theorist Ariela Freedman argued that Salomon’s rapid painting style conveys “emotional patterns of panic and latent hysteria.”⁵ Salomon herself called her work “mad and unusual,” yet if her work is mad and unusual, it does not mean that Salomon was such.⁶ Historian and biographer Mary Felstiner is one of the scholars on Salomon who employs

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³ Early research and scholarship regarding Salomon began with a biographical approach that transitioned into psychoanalytical perspectives. Historian and biographer, Mary Lowenthal Felstiner, compiled the most comprehensive biography in her book *To Paint Her Life*. Art historian and scholar, Griselda Pollock, has written most extensively on psychological aspects of *Life? or Theater?* and has moved into semiotics and memory.

⁴ Ernest van Alphen, “Giving Voice: Charlotte Salomon and Charlotte Delbo” in *Reading Charlotte Salomon*, ed. Michael P. Steinberg and Monica Bohm-Duchen (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 117. Van Alphen is quick to argue that because *Leben? oder Theater?* is a work depicting trauma that was prompted by a state of familial suicide and war. However, van Alphen distinguishes between the images that are about trauma, reading them as a symptom of trauma, and the meditative way to heal trauma. Salomon’s fixation on life and death help to further her healing, as it is the point of access for her art to become therapeutic. Van Alphen believes that Salomon’s obsessive painting encapsulates the trauma to make sense of it, and it then it is resolved.


⁶ Felstiner, *To Paint Her Life*, 126. In many ways Felstiner is not only writing about Salomon’s life, but readdresses whether Salomon was mad. Felstiner uses this quote to help emphasize the idea that Salomon was cognizant of her actions while painting. And, it was the creation of *Life? or Theater?*—a work that seemed mad—that saved her from insanity. Felstiner interprets Salomon’s declaration “etwas ganz verrückt besonderes” as “something so wild and unusual.” I, however, translate it as “something mad and unusual” Leo.org, a trusted online German dictionary, lists the meaning of verrückt as: zany, certifiable, crazy, made, lunatic, and demented. Felstiner
a psychoanalytical approach. She notes that Salomon kept many secrets, but it was through painting that a sense of control and safety were found.\(^7\) It was the most secure route for examining her horror.

Salomon’s repetitious depictions in *Life? or Theater?* include a majority of portrayals of Alfred Wolfsohn. Scholars have only lightly touched on or omitted discussion of how influential Wolfsohn was for Salomon’s artistic endeavors. Salomon, in all rationality and lucidity, engaged in an obsessive painting style while creating *Life? or Theater?*. For her, this project quickened the process of healing and her ability to fully understand her own sanity. Furthermore, creating was made an effective liberating tool by integrating Alfred Wolfsohn’s vocal theories of catharsis.\(^8\) Through the incorporation of Expressionistic forms, Jungian theory, and Wolfsohn’s musical practices, Salomon was able to facilitate her own healing in a methodical and sane manner, in order to expel inner pain and turmoil and to find inner peace.

In many ways, salvation from anguish and trauma was exactly what Salomon was longing for when she crafted *Life? or Theater?:* redemption from possible inherited insanity, liberation from her abusive grandfather, and a declaration that she was more than an invisible and shy woman without a voice. The work is visually and thematically complex due to its numerous influences, yet it is in the vastness of paint, text, transparent overlays, cinematic influences, musical notations, and theater that the magical effectiveness of *Life? or Theater?* as

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\(^7\) Felstiner, *To Paint Her Life*, 126. Although killing herself was an option, Salomon was keenly aware of the stigma that surrounded suicide—known in German as *selbstmord*. In Berlin, health officials called it a menace to public health. The stigma of suicide progressed as German doctors blamed Jewish citizens of inbreeding which lead to “Jewish lunatics.” Ultimately, Felstiner concludes that *Leben? oder Theater?* is work that shows the power of survival in Salomon, but it also shows the ways Jews survived malice. Ultimately, Felstiner concludes that *Leben? Oder Theater?* is a work that shows the Salomon’s power of survival.

\(^8\) van Alphen, “Giving Voice: Charlotte Salomon and Charlotte Delbo,” 120.
cathartic Gesamtkunstwerk resides.⁹ To expound the importance of Salomon’s emotional expulsion in Life? or Theater?, this thesis considers her biography, her formal art training at the Vereinigte Staatsschulen für Freie und Angewandte Kunst, and the combination of her traumatic life events, her training as a visual artist, and her inclusion of musical and theatrical elements emphasize her ability to efficiently call upon the most effective and expressive style for her catharsis. In its synthesis, Salomon’s Life? or Theater? becomes a pinnacle of German Expressionism as Gesamtkunstwerk.

As trauma was a reoccurring theme in Salomon’s life, painting and creation became her purification and the means by which she recovered her own sanity. In arguing for the importance of Wolfsohn’s theories, and by understanding her work as catharsis via Gesamtkunstwerk, this thesis contributes to new ways of understanding Salomon’s complex work, Life? or Theater?, as more than an illustrated autobiography of melodrama and despair.

Charlotte Salomon’s Life and Training

Born in April of 1917 to Albert and Franziska Salomon, an upper-middle class couple in Berlin, Charlotte Salomon’s life was filled with tragedy and trauma. Salomon’s mother, Franziska, was considered by friends and family to embody a constant state of melancholy. When Salomon was eight years old, Franziska’s already sullen demeanor shifted to a state of despair. Almost suddenly she no longer found joy in any aspect of her life and could only stare blankly outside.¹⁰ On February 25, 1926, Franziska Salomon jumped from a third floor window to her death (Fig. 1).¹¹ Ashamed of the events, and as a means of protection, Salomon’s father

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⁹ Architecture is the only element of the Gesamtkunstwerk that is not an apparent part of Life? or Theater? However, Salomon painted blueprint-like plans of her parents first home. See jhm.org image 4168. http://www.jhm.nl/collection/specials/charlotte-salomon/leben-oder-theater
¹⁰ Felstiner, To Paint Her Life, 5. Franziska Salomon, called Fränze, reportedly stood staring blankly out of a window in the family home beginning in the winter of 1925-26
and her maternal grandparents informed the young child that her mother had passed away from a severe case of influenza.\footnote{Felstiner, \textit{Life? or Theater?}, 12-14. Fränze’s obituary in the \textit{Berliner Tageblatt}, dated February 25, 1926, translated by Felstiner reads: “After a short but difficult illness our most beloved and cheerful wife, mother, and daughter, Fränze Grunwald Salomon has left us. We ask that you abstain from condolence visits.” In image 4184 of \textit{Life? or Theater?}, Salomon notably omits the word “cheerful.”} This false account of her mother’s demise was a seemingly small lie that covered up enormous and shameful secrets\footnote{Felstiner, \textit{Create Her World Anew}, 197. Fränze Salomon’s death was cloaked in such secrecy it is likely that the family was fearful of the social implications of suicide. “Male suicide in Germany was often considered heroic…But female suicide (especially by Jews, who were already accused of abnormality) was unforgivable. It produced a shame that led to secrecy, and secrecy led to silence.”} of multiple family suicides that included Salomon’s mother, aunts and one uncle.\footnote{Darcy Buerkle, \textit{Nothing Happened: Charlotte Salomon and an Archive of Suicide} (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2013), 139.} In the following years, Salomon’s father married a well-known singer, Paula Lindberg-Salomon (Fig. 2). It is through the relationship with her stepmother that Salomon would meet the charismatic Alfred Wolfsohn, a man whose teachings greatly influenced the artistic expression she developed in a Berlin art academy, the Vereinigte Staatsschulen für Freie und Angewandte Kunst.

In 1935, at the age of twenty-two,\footnote{“Biography,” Jewish Historical Museum, last modified 2009, accessed January 11, 2016, http://www.jhm.nl/collection/specials/charlotte-salomon/biography. In the beginning, Salomon’s enrollment in the art academy was a trial period before she was officially enrolled. From jhm.nl: “Charlotte starts attending the Vereinigte Staatsschulen für Freie und Angewandte Kunst in the autumn of 1935, at first on approval, and from 7 February 1936, unconditionally.”} Salomon enrolled in the Vereinigte Staatsschulen für Freie und Angewandte Kunst (Unified State School for Fine and Applied Art), which by this time had become a Nazi controlled academy (Fig. 3).\footnote{William Owen Harrod, “The Vereinigte Staatsschulen für Freie und Angewandte Kunst and the Mainstream of German Modernism,” \textit{Architectural History} 52 (2009), 263.} Founded in the early years of the 1910’s by German architect and illustrator Bruno Paul, the school began as an institution in direct competition with the Bauhaus, and it implemented a similar approach to the curriculum.\footnote{Ibid., 63.} Aware of quickly changing artistic styles, Paul ran the school with open-mindedness concerning personal expression. Furthermore, the course work encouraged exploration into processes of

Salomon exists today. She links this idea to the shame her family felt about her suicide. It is only painted images of Salomon’s mother that present her as a visual entity.
ever-changing individual manifestations in the visual arts. The faculty at the Vereinigte Staatsschulen included many artists who themselves were exploring their own ideas in Expressionism. As late as 1933 these included: Cesar Klein, Karl Hofer, Oskar Schlemmer, and Emil Rudolf Weiß. By the end of 1934, Nazi Powers released these artists from their teaching positions as they were deemed “degenerate artists”. While Salomon was enrolled in the Vereinigte Staatsschulen, only two years later, the young Nazi regime already had firm control of the administration of the school. And yet, even with this anti-Semitic leadership, Salomon, a Jewish and female student, was admitted.

For Salomon, a “non-Aryan” female, admission into Vereinigte Staatsschulen, was based on an entrance exam and on her parents service in the German military. The new administration allowed for a student body that was 1.5% Jewish based on the condition that his or her father served in World War I. Salomon was full-blooded in her Jewry, but the faithful service of her father, a surgeon, and her mother, a nurse, during the war was more than sufficient evidence of the Salomon Family’s dedication to the country. Nevertheless her ability to bear Jewish “non-Aryan” children was considered a danger to the Nazi cause. Salomon’s quiet and reserved nature provided a loophole for the young artist.

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18 Harrod, 252.
21 Felstiner, To Paint Her Life, 35-8. Salomon studied intensely with a private tutor before taking the entrance exam.
23 Felstiner, To Paint Her Life, 38. Felstiner notes the 1936 Nazi policy on the classification of race in the following way: “Nazi’s defined ‘non-Aryans’ as those with a Jewish grandparent.[.]”
The administration saw her solemn and withdrawn personality as passive and unappealing to the “male-Aryan” students, and therefore non-threatening to the nation or to the school. Since the Vereinigte Staatsschulen administration believed she posed no real threat to the Nazi cause, they allowed Salomon to engage in formal artistic training.

In the two years prior to Salomon’s enrollment in the Vereinigte Staatsschulen, the faculty and the accompanying course work shifted drastically. The curriculum, now under Nazi authority, transitioned from Expressionism and concepts of modern living, to a curriculum that vehemently dictated a withdrawal from the abstraction of form and the practice of any “ism” in art, be it Expressionism or Impressionism, as it was considered “French or un-German.” With the goal of establishing a “true” and unadulterated German culture, the curriculum of the Vereinigte Staatsschulen changed its focus to classical renderings of the body. The exception to this was minimal abstraction or distortion to forms that accompanied illustrations of German folk or fairytales, as they were an essential element in the foundation of German heritage.

Salomon’s training in academic art and fairytale illustration at the Vereinigte Staatsschulen is evident in a number of her depictions. Early chalk and pastel drawings of a knight on a horse (Fig. 4) and a mass of dancing figures demonstrates Salomon’s training in the illustration of fairytales (Fig. 5). Furthermore, her education in academic art is evident in Life or Theater?. In one of her illustrations Salomon depicts herself in a semi-circle of peers, all studying and sketching a male nude, as part of their entrance exam for the academy (Fig. 6).

24 Felstiner, To Paint Her Life, 39. The minutes from Salomon’s admissions committee read, “The artistic abilities of the full Jew Fräulein Salomon, are beyond doubt. Her behavior is also recognized to be modest and reserved. There is no reason to doubt her German attitude. In spite of this, Herr Scheunemann [a Nazi student leader] protested on principle the admission of Jewish female students because they present a danger to the Aryan male students. Professor Bartning, however, pointed out that this danger does not apply in the case of Fräulein Salomon because of her reserved nature.” See also: Mary Lowenthal Felstiner, “Creating Her World Anew: Seven Dilemmas in Re-presenting Charlotte Salomon.” In Reading Charlotte Salomon, edited by Michael P. Steinberg and Monica Bohm-Duchen (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 198. And: Report of Admissions Committee, February 7, 1936, archive of the Hochschule der Künste Berlin.
This image reflects Salomon’s academic course work under the tutelage of Erich Böhm and Ludwig Bartning. These professors’ pedagogy was based on the past classical academic styles in order to purposefully avoid any risk of exposing students to degenerate or “un-German” art.

While the new Nazi administration rejected the idea and practice of Expressionism at the Vereinigte Staatsschulen, artists and theorists such as Bertolt Brecht, George Lukács, and Alfred Kruella continued to argue the pros and cons of Expressionism and Social Realism and their impact on a changing governmental system. As such, Expressionism once thought of as “Germany’s modern movement,” came under severe scrutiny from those who believed art of a revolution should be solely “linked to realism and classicism.” Salomon’s art education was

25 Harrod, 263. The change in curriculum also meant a change in administration. In 1933 Bruno Paul was replaced by Hans Poelzig, followed by Max Kutschmann. In 1936, the last head of Vereinigte Staatsschulen was Peter Behrens, a member of the Nazi Party.

26 Fischer-Defoy and Crossley, 17. Nazi powers dictated mental health status based on the art produced. Fischer-Defoy and Crossley write, “A further criterion of Nazi arts politics was the rejection of all ‘isms’ that could be regarded as French or un-German. Any breakdown of form, be it through Impressionism, Expressionism or Cubism was a manifestation of irrationalism and, in the final analysis…a product of a mentally sick person.”

27 Harrod, 263.

28 Fischer-Defoy and Crossley, 24.

29 Jhm.nl, “Life or Theater?”


31 Jodi Veron, Drawing to an Inside Straight: The Legacy of an Absent Father (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 276. “[C]harlotte’s development as an artist was stymied by history and by her teachers’ narrow vision. Charlotte was scolded in one gouache for not depicting an accurate number of cactus spines in a drawing she had presented to her teacher for scrutiny…The teacher, microscope on desk rather than brushes and paints, commented on Charlotte’s “nice, modest talent,” her sting the reward for the artist’s developing curiosity. It was only when Charlotte left the institute and began to paint what was in her imagination.” Salomon’s oeuvre consists on Life? or Theater? and only a handful of other works. Of these are a few figure drawings that reiterate Salomon’s academic training. See jhm.org for Salomon’s additional works.

32 Stephen Parker, Bertolt Brecht: A Literary Life (Edinburgh: A&C Black, 2014), 369. Alfred Kruella wrote under the name Bernhard Ziegler. The compiled arguments are known as Das Wort.


34 Rose-Carol Washton Long ed., German Expressionism: Documents from the End of the Wilhelmine Empire to the Rise of National Socialism (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1993), 312. In late 1934 Georg Lukács argued that the rise of Expressionism helped enable the rise of Nazi power. In 1937 Klaus Mann argued the importance of the Expressionists.
concurrent with these arguments as the curriculum of the Vereinigte Staatsschulen began to favor realism. The newly governing officials took nearly three years to officially stamp out Expressionism from art education and from any cultural aspect of German life. This meant that for three additional years, artists continued to produce avant-garde and Expressionist forms. Examples of such are seen in the work of established Expressionist Emil Nolde’s *Doppelbildnis* of 1937 (Fig. 7). While Salomón’s artistic education was based in classical forms, she would have been keenly aware of past Expressionist art and visual culture during her early years in Berlin.

The Vereinigte Staatsschulen was situated in the same neighborhood as Salomón’s home in Charlottenburg, Berlin (Fig. 8). In a neighborhood frequented by Expressionist artists, Salomón’s daily life would have been filled with their images. These influences appeared regularly in film and poster art and would have been a common visual occurrence in Salomón’s adolescent neighborhood. For Salomón, surrounded by Expressionist images like those of Käthe Kollwitz and Emil Nolde, the creation of *Life? or Theater?* was not a random experimentation of

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36 Fischer-Defoy and Crossley, 24. Between 1917-1938 A rule put in place to prevent the overfilling of academies also including a section “outlawing German Expressionism.” In 1937 Expressionism was officially “excluded from all cultural life.” The void left by the ousting of German Expressionism was filled with “pseudo-classical, heroic, official German art.” With the beginning of WWII this later became a fully dedicated to wartime propaganda.
37 “Emil Nolde,” Art Directory, accessed November 19, 2015, http://www.emil-nolde.com. Nolde resided in the northern German town Seebüll. He was permitted to exhibit his works until 1939, at which point the Nazi’s deemed a “Degenerate Artist.” Other Expressionist such as Felix Nussbaum and Paul Klee fled Germany in the 1930’s. Because of this, they were able to continue painting in an Expressionist manner until the early 1940’s.
38 Fischer-Defoy and Crossley, 251. In the beginning, the Vereinigte Staatsschulen was an amalgamation of various unified schools. The Akademische Hochshule on the Steinplatze of Charlottenburg was selected as its permanent home.
39 Harrod, 238. Bruno Paul, director of the Vereinigte Staatsschulen, pushed students to explore new and expressive forms that countered historical painting. This included delving into new art forms like film, poster art, and costume design. “[Bruno] Paul discouraged the classroom study of historical models that had characterized artistic education in the nineteenth century.”
forms and formats. Instead it is a work that reflects her exposure to the concept of Expressionist Gesamtkunstwerk with the amalgamation of painting, music, the written word, theater, and cinema.

Salomon’s expressive creation of Life? or Theater? was also a natural progression of her own personal style; a style influenced by the Expressionists visual culture that encircled her early years in Berlin. Salomon’s formal elements directly call upon the loose and expressive forms, arbitrary colors, and emotive aesthetics of the Expressionists. Moreover, by adopting this style in Life? or Theater? in 1940, Salomon emphatically broke from the formal training imposed by the Nazi regime at the Vereinigte Staatsschulen. Her Expressionist approach to her work was also feasible as Salomon was painting in the safety of the South of France and not in the center or Berlin.

40 Herbert Beck, forward to The Total Artwork in Expressionism: Art, Film, Literature, Theater, Dance, and Architecture, 1905-1925, edited by Ralf Beil and Claudia Dilmann (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011), greetings. According to Beck, Gesamtkunstwerk was not always a finished product or project. Often, it was the evolution of an idea that was continually growing and evolving entity. Film was an ideal platform to explore these early ideas and to simultaneously display a multitude of mediums. This meant that music, theater backdrop images, story, words, and acting combined to make a “whole” work of Expressionist art. Hans Janowitz and Carl Meyer’s 1920 film, The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, is one of the earliest examples of Gesamtkunstwerk in Film. For a history of early film in Berlin see: Kracauer, Siegfried. From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947.

41 Beck, “Forward.” Dr. Herbert Beck described the idea of Gesamtkunstwerk as a movement based on the urge to push ever deeper into invalidating past artistic canons. “The phenomenon of Expressionism at the beginning of the twentieth century was based essentially on an elemental artistic urge to overturn and oppose. A greater intensity of artistic expression was required to prise society from the rigidities of nineteenth-century convictions and counter the estrangement of the individual.”

42 See Christine Conley, “Memory and Trauerspiel: Charlotte Salomon’s Life? or Theater? and the Angel of History,” in Reading Charlotte Salomon, ed. Michael P. Steinberg and Monica Bohm Duchen (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2006),102. While Conley does not directly address Salomon’s painting style as a rebellion, she does write extensively about her use of German texts which Nazi powers would have seen this act as an attack on the nation. Particularly since Jewish intellectuals were openly attacked and barred from participating in German cultural life. Conley states that this was an attack on the foundations of Jewry in within the country. This led to the formation of the Jüdischer Kulturbund. Salomon depicts the end of the Lindberg-Salomon’s last performance to a Nazi audience as she is heckled and laughed off the stage. Salomon’s act of including German texts can be extended into act of defiance with inserting inverted swastikas and continued to display disloyalty in the very style in which she painted.
In June of 1938, after studying for nearly three years at the Vereinigte Staatsschulen, Salomon’s art education came to an abrupt end as anti-Semitic sentiments flourished in Berlin. As the Nazi occupation of their home country raged, Albert Salomon desperately sought safety for his only child. Salomon’s father and stepmother sent her to find political refuge with her grandparents, Ludwig and Marianne Benda Grunwald, in Nice, France. However, Salomon’s time with her grandparents was not the idyllic safe haven Albert had intended.

In 1939, at the age of twenty-one, Salomon was placed in the role of caretaker to her ailing and suicidal grandmother. The mental instability that plagued Salomon’s mother was once again a main focal point of Salomon’s life as she spent numerous days sitting with and watching over her grandmother. Salomon’s chore was complicated by Grunwald’s attempted suicide, a failed hanging in the bathroom, after which Salomon found her with a noose around her neck and nearly dead. In the weeks that followed, Grunwald’s behavior remained chaotic. Salomon sat by her side recollecting Wolfsohn’s ability to heal through singing and she was convinced that this would cure her ailing grandmother. However, Salomon’s attempt at curing her grandmother were thwarted. In a moment of unsupervised freedom, Grunwald hurled herself from a third floor window.

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44 "Charlotte Salomon: Biography," jhm.nl. Translated by the Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam.
45 Emil Straus, “Biographical Note,” in Charlotte: A Diary in Pictures, by Charlotte Salomon (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1963), 3. Straus emphasizes the strain of Salomon’s relationship with her grandparents. “She did not get along too well her grandparents, and sometimes there were open quarrels. This was no mere conflict between generations, but something more deep-seated. They were profoundly different in temperament and had been molded in radically different worlds.” This was also emphasized with the emotional strain of acting as a caretaker for her grandmother and living with her abusive grandfather.
46 Felstiner, To Paint Her Life, 234. Felstiner believes that manic depression might be a diagnosis for the Salomon family. The condition was frequently talked about in 1920’s German, but there was not pharmaceutical help at the time.
47 Ibid., 104.
The recklessness of Salomon’s grandmother drove her grandfather to divulge the suicidal secrets her family had withheld from her for years, including that of her own mother (Fig. 9).48

Ludwig Grunwald’s revelation of her mother’s suicide added to the onslaught of trauma in Salomon’s life. During the spring of 1940, when Salomon was confounded by the disclosure of her family history, France was desperately fending off German troops.49 In the panic and haste of securing the French nation from an internal infiltration of Germans,50 whom the French believed to be “causing France’s defeat,”51 Salomon, her grandfather, and numerous other refugees, were forced from Nice to an internment camp known as Gurs, in the Pyrenees Mountains (Fig. 10).52 Salomon’s life quickly shifted from the refuge of Nice to a torturous existence in mud, filth, and refuse.53

In July of 1940, all elderly captives, including Grunwald, were released from Gurs, and for some unknown reason, Salomon was discharged as well. A group of roughly sixty women in Gurs stole certificates of release and forged the Commissaries’ signature. However, Salomon was not part of the group who obtained false documents.54 When a German commission arrived at Gurs to review papers, Salomon somehow was released, most likely to take care of her ailing

49 Ibid., 117.
50 Griselda Pollock, “Nameless before the Concentrationary Void,” in *Concentrationary Memories: Totalitarian Terror and Cultural Resistance*, ed. Griselda Pollock and Max Silverman (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 181. Gurs was originally built to house refugees from the Spanish Civil War after the fall of Cataluña. The German Franco Armistice of 1940 dictated that Gurs become an internment/concentration camp. Under the Armistice France was also divided into two regions: Northern France controlled by the Vichy regime.
51 Ibid., 180.
52 Felstiner, *To Paint Her Life*, 117. Able-bodied men were already interned when a Nice newspaper headline, dated May 24, 1940, read “Les Femmes ressortissants allemandes doivant se render au centre de Gurs”—Women who are German nationals must present themselves at the Gurs center.” At the time of publication, it was decided, “women were no less dangerous than men.” Translated by Felstiner.
53 Pollock, “Nameless Before the Concentrationary Void,” 181-82. Among a description of the horrors endured at Gurs, Pollock also notes that by June 1940, Gurs had become a full-fledged concentration camp with all of the associated horrors. Felstiner, however, uses the milder term “internment camp.”
54 Ibid.
grandfather. Whatever the reason for her release, Salomon’s newly acquired freedom provided her with time to create *Life? or Theater?*, which she began after her release and upon returning to the South of France.

Upon her return to Nice with her grandfather, Salomon proclaimed, “God, how beautiful it is here!” However, the joy that encompassed her arrival back into the warmth and comfort of the Côte d’Azur was counterbalanced by an internal aching and despair. One day in a declaration of rage, Salomon’s grandfather forcefully urged her to kill herself. Believing this would inevitably be the cause of her demise anyway, her grandfather cruelly incited her to simply speed up the process. He exasperatingly exclaimed, “Oh just do it, kill yourself too, so this yakking of yours can stop!” The unforgiving howl of his abusive words welled within Salomon, as she herself was in the throes of questioning her own sanity. As Salomon mourned the loss of her mother, grandmother, and the violence she experienced at Gurs and at home, a new self-awareness was sprouting within the artist—and with it the question: Was the burden of matrilineal suicide one of heredity; was it also to be Salomon’s inescapable death?

Not only did Salomon’s grandfather coldheartedly spout out family secrets of suicide at the occasion of his wife’s death, he sexually abused Salomon. He became one more entity for

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55 Pollock, “Nameless Before the Concentrationary Void,” 181-82. Concerning Salomon’s surprising release Griselda Pollock wrote, “It makes no sense. But it was a chaotic, pre-Gestapo period.”


57 Felstiner, *To Paint Her Life*, 126. This proclamation was made as Salomon and her Grandfather returned to the Cote d’Azur from the internment camp at Gurs. In a moment of trying to vocally work through what she had experienced, her grandfather exclaimed, “Oh just do it, kill yourself too, so this yakking of yours can stop!” It was at this moment that Salomon turned deep within to begin to answer the gnawing question of life or death. In *Charlotte*, Leila Vennewitz translated Salomon’s phrase, “Nun nimm dir doch schon endlich das Leben damit dies Geklöne endlich aufhört,” “Oh, go ahead and kill yourself and put an end to all this babble.” Other Authors, such as Pollock and Bohm-Duchen, prefer this translation. See page 774.

58 Ibid.

59 Salomon’s relationship with her grandfather was sordid and troubled. After her time at Gurs she declared that she would rather spend three weeks in the camp than one night in the same bed as her grandfather. References are made as to incestuous advances from her grandfather, Dr. Grunwald. Salomon states, “My grandfather was a symbol of the people I had to fight.” See Felstiner, *To Paint Her Life*, 124 – 126, Salomon, *Charlotte, Charlotte: A Diary in Pictures*, and Pollock, *Crimes, Confessions, and the Everyday: Challenges in Reading Charlotte Salomon’s Leben? Order Theater?*. 

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Salomon to fear. Additionally, between June and September of 1940, while Salomon and her grandfather were imprisoned at Gurs, Salomon was subjected to forced sexual acts with another captive Jewish man. What could have become Salomon’s undoing, turned into an act of fate upon her return to the South of France. An American expatriate, Ottilie Moore, ran the l’Ermitage in VillaFranche-sur-Mer, seven kilometers east of Nice, and took a special interest in Salomon (Fig. 11). In an effort to remove her from her grandfather’s company, Moore took Salomon in and provided funding for Salomon to live at the Hotel La Belle Aurora, in St. Jean Cap Ferrat, France, about 10 kilometers east of Nice. Moore’s subsidies not only afforded Salomon a safe place to live, the monies allowed her to spend a majority of her time feverishly painting on the sun filled shores of the Côte d’Azur.

While in St. Jean Cap Ferrat, Salomon obsessively painted *Life? or Theater?*. For her creation to be a cathartically effective process, Salomon needed the security afforded to her by Moore: a safe place, free from Nazi internment and free of her grandfather’s abuse. Salomon worked compulsively on her expressive images. Her creative process consumed her. The owner of Hotel La Belle Aurora, Marthe Pécher, noted that Salomon was too busy to interact with or to eat with the other guests, but with a small amount of time spent together in the evenings, Pécher was aware of her situation.

We were living, both of us, through some very bad moments. She always painted in her room, Number 1, a little room carpeted in pink. Charlotte rented only the room, she did not take meals, so sometimes in the evening I used to take her a bowl of hot soup—rutabaga, that horrible rutabaga—practically our only nourishment at the time.

Tucked into the retreat of Number 1, unfettered from imprisonment and sexual assault, Salomon was able to spend her energy and focus on the creation *Life? or Theater?*.

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60 See footnote 19.
62 Felstiner, *To Paint Her Life*, 141-2. La Belle Aurora is now named Hotel Villa Cap Ferrat.
In June of 1943, with the completion of *Life? or Theater*, Salomon returned to Nice to once again care for her ailing grandfather. Moore had provided safety for Salomon, and she did the same for her grandfather. Grunwald’s abusive behavior toward Salomon continued via abrasive letters urging her to come back to him. This was compounded by threats from the police, after all her release from Gurs likely centered on her care of the old man and she was spending too much time away from him. Although she was tremendously frustrated by this turn of events, Salomon returned to Nice. And upon Grunwald’s death, Salomon moved to Moore’s l’Ermitage.

Salomon’s circle of friends and family had begun to diminish when she arrived back in VillaFranche-sur-Mer. The already sporadic contact with her father and stepmother, who had fled to Amsterdam, was made even more so with the Nazi invasion of Holland. Moreover, Moore had returned to the United States, Wolfsohn was in England, and Salomon’s grandparents were gone; however, Salomon found companionship with a Romanian refugee, Alexander Nagler who was also a resident at Moore’s l’Ermitage. Upon Moore’s departure, Salomon remarked that she had left Nagler behind and that she had no idea how to deal with him. This awkward and tenuous relationship set the stage for Salomon’s first and only marriage.

Nagler was also a refugee; first fleeing from Romania and Austria, and finally settling in at Ottlie Moore’s l’Ermitage in VillaFranche-sur-Mer, France. He was a notorious drunk at and had a reputation of a “sorry specimen.” Yet, since he was Moore’s lover, he was allowed to

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63 Felstiner, *To Paint Her Life*, 167.
64 Jhm.nl, “*Life? or Theater?*”, images 4926-3 through 4931-4. Salomon’s postscript to *Life? or Theater?* indicates that Grunwald treated Moore very poorly and often stole food from her cellar.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid., 169.
stay in her villa. However, when Moore left France, she also left Nagler. When Salomon returned to l’Ermitage, she found a comfort and a sense of stability with him. Salomon’s friend and former resident of l’Ermitage, Emil Straus, noted that she grew increasingly fond and in need of Nagler. He said, “Nagler and Charlotte became dependent on each other; he was her companion, protector, and friend.” 71 The two were married on June 17, 1943 in the Nice Town Hall.

Controversy surrounds the marriage of Nagler and Salomon because of their nationalities, religions, and status as refugees, but it is likely that pregnancy was the reason for the nuptials. The couple started their new life together and lived alone at l’Ermitage. 72 During this time, Nagler took an intense interest in Salomon’s work and was concerned for its safety. Life? or Theater? was wrapped up and the package labels were written by Nagler. 73 They read: “Property of Mrs. Moore.” 74 The indication of ownership likely saved the work from Nazi destruction as Felstiner notes that this was, “A useful ruse for keeping the artwork safe.” 75 In this manner, Life? or Theater?, the work that saved Salomon, was protected from destruction.

Life? or Theater?

Salomon began Life? or Theater? in early fall of 1940, upon leaving Gurs, and returning to Nice. 76 There was of course, the process of grieving associated with the atrocious conditions she had left behind in the Pyrenees, but for Salomon there was also the question of an inherited madness. Through the means of insightful internal self-inquisition and through an outward and equally profound expression of paint, words, and music, Salomon created a safe intellectual

71 Felstiner, To Paint Her Life, 170.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid., 174.
75 Ibid.
76 Jhm.nl, “Biography.”
place to explore the question of sanity and her looming thoughts of suicide.77 In its earliest
inception, *Life? or Theater?* was a means of catharsis and a platform for Salomon to prove to
herself that she was sane, to expel the horror of Gurs, and to find her voice. The answer to the
questioning of her sanity had to be one of her own discovery. Salomon was not willing to hinge
her life on the speculation and cajoling of her grandfather or on the past actions of her loved
ones.78 Moreover, Salomon’s undertaking of her massive project, *Life? or Theater?* was a
decision she made in full cognizance of her mental state. Hopeful of the outcome, Salomon wrote
to her father residing in Amsterdam, “I will create my story as not to lose my mind.”79 To do so,
Salomon turned to her training at the Vereinigte Staatsschulen and to the influence of German
Expressionists, namely the practice of *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

The concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* is the fusion of all art forms synthesized into one
superlative work. It was an artistic movement directly suited to Salomon’s purpose.80 Visual art
melded with theater, dance, music, literature, and cinema became the means by which
Expressionists could create a “total or universal” work of art.81 Furthermore, the influence of
Richard Wagner’s compositions and Friedrich Nietzsche’s theories of all-encompassing
expression acted as a means of salvation through the creative process.82 In many ways, salvation
from the pain of loss and acts of violence was exactly what Salomon was longing for when she

77 Felstiner, *To Paint Her Life*, 111. In a letter to her father, Salomon declared, “I will create a story as not to
lose my mind.” In image 4907 of *Life? or Theater?*, Salomon painted, “Dear God, just let me not go mad.” “Leiber
Gott, lass mich blass nicht wahnsinnig werden.” Translated by Felstiner.
78 Mary Lowenthal Felstiner, “Creating Her World Anew: Seven Dilemmas in Re-presenting Charlotte
Salomon.” In *Reading Charlotte Salomon*, edited by Michael P. Steinberg and Monica Bohm-Duchen (Ithaca:
Cornell University Press, 2006), 196. Felstiner notes that the addition of her grandmother’s death prompted Salomon
to paint even more vigorously.
79 Ibid., 196.
80 Architecture is the only element of the Gesamtkunstwerk that is not an apparent part of *Life? or Theater?*
However, Salomon painted blueprint-like plans of her parents first home.
81 Beck, *greetings*. According to Wassily Kandinsky, with the radical synesthetic combination of art,
literature, theater, dance, architecture, and music, the Expressionists hoped to get “a particularly overwhelming
effect. “The fusion of the arts in the “total artwork” was, thus, a real concern for Expressionism[,]”
crafted *Life? or Theater?*—redemption from possible genetic insanity, liberation from her abusive grandfather, and a declaration that she was more than an invisible woman without a voice.

*Life? or Theater?* as *Gesamtkunstwerk* is also addressed in the book-like qualities and musical notations of the work. While it was never bound, Salomon scholars believe that the pages of *Life? or Theater?* were to be read like a book, flipping the pages from right to left.\(^8^3\) This book-like attribute is further emphasized by the incorporation of text, either within the images or written on outlying transparent pages. Words streaked across these pages’ act as both literary markers and decorative motifs. With the addition of text, Salomon emphasized and reiterated her autobiographical story (Fig.12). The dialogue and narration are further accentuated with the addition of musical notations which indicate that either the song is to be heard within the reader’s mind while directly engaging with the works or that the tune is to be sung in conjunction with the images. With the inclusion of these notations, *Life? or Theater?* then takes on an operatic-like context. For example, a vivid scene of Christmas events is to be read with the melody and words of *Stille Nacht* in mind (Fig. 13). Through music and text Salomon conveys the dynamic nature of her story in a way that is complex and engaging.

Salomon continued experimenting with Expressionist forms and influences in *Life? or Theater?* with the incorporation of carefully crafted mask-like faces and images that employ a liberal application of arbitrary color. Mask-like faces are found in a number of Expressionist images. The emergence of indigenous “non-European” ceremonial masks and a fascination with “primitive” peoples and cultures in the early 1900’s was a driving force as artists sought to return to a simpler and purer art form.

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\(^8^3\) Pages from *Life? or Theater?* that include transparent overlays were taped together by Salomon. Transparent tape remnants remain on the left sides of these pages indicating that the pages were meant to be flipped from left to right, in a book-like manner.
This was not lost on German Expressionists who were facing urbanization and the subsequent isolation or dehumanization of persons. As such, mask faced figures repeatedly appear in their depictions of modern life.

The well-established Expressionist Emil Nolde created several paintings of disembodied heads and masks of native peoples. In his 1911 painting, *In a Night-Bar*, Nolde employs his method of masking the faces of a metropolitan, upper-class couple (Fig.14). The man’s face is the dominant feature in the painting which confronts the viewer. However, his face does not look like the face of a man, but that of a stylized mask with sharply carved features. Nolde’s, *Masks and Dahlias* of 1919 (Fig. 15), incorporates four masks with a flower, and a sculptural stag. While the masks are anchored to a wall behind, they appear to be disembodied and floating in a phantasmal fashion. His *Trophies of the Savages* of 1914 depicts a series of four severed heads impaled on a long wooden skewer (Fig.16). While this depiction is not of masks, the heads are disembodied, expressive, and the facial features are masklike. Salomon embraces and employs the idea of the mask-esque faces and disembodied heads to further the expressive nature of her work.

In his 1924 essay, *Mensch und Maske*, the Expressionist dramatist and theater director Lothar Schreyer, writes that the use of the mask in theatrical productions is two-fold. First, the mask is a tool which helps the actors “purify their inner world.” Second, the audience can

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84 Rose-Carol Washton Long ed., *German Expressionism: Documents from the End of the Wilhelmine Empire to the Rise of National Socialism* (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1993), xxi. “From the very beginning, artists associated with Expressionism, attacked not only the conventions of art but also the conventions of a society they found materialistic and dehumanizing. The rapid industrialization of Germany at the end of the nineteenth century, set up conditions that paved the way for art movements that questioned authority.”


project their own issues onto the mask worn by an actor and cleanse their own psyche. Schreyer believed that the mask was not an object or a disguise to hide behind. Rather, as if in a spiritual exercise, it was a means by which a person could connect to his or her true identity. Wearing the mask is a sort of purification as the actor transforms from who she believes herself to be into her true essence. In the process of creation Salomon wrote, “I was my mother, my grandmother, yes I was all the people in my play…I learned to walk paths and I became MYSELF.” Through repetitious, and often-frenetic painting, Salomon figuratively “tried on” the masks of key people in her life: her mother, grandmother, and Wolfsohn. Like Schreyer’s theory suggests, she purified her inner world, painted it, and through her work, became wholly her own person.

Taking a visual cue from Nolde’s use of disembodied heads, Salomon repeatedly incorporated free-floating heads in Life? or Theater?—predominantly depicting Wolfsohn (Fig. 17). While painting the head alone might have been due to her quick pace of production, the repetitive line-up is a tool that conveys a change in emotion or mood with each word that the figure is expressing. Sometimes recognizable, other times a conglomeration of color and brushstrokes, each head is a mask-like entity floating on a sea of contemplative white space—reflective of the Expressionist’s fascination with the primitive and directly harkening back to

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88 Keith-Smith, 195.
89 Ibid.
90 Ibid. Keith-Smith believes that by incorporating and engaging with a mask, a person is able to reach internal heights ordinarily accessible. “The function of the mask in his theater is to release the actor from his own personality and from any identifiable role. It therefore becomes a means of ‘purifying’ the actor’s inner world, and, in doing so, its effects of harmony, order and independence may be transferred to the audience, who may be led to form a selfless community…Drama is the inner action of the human being who recognizes himself in and through his action changes himself into higher humanity.”
92 Carl Jung’s theory of the mask is somewhat different from Schreyer. Jung believed that the mask, or the persona, referred to an individual’s private and public lives. Salomon was often referred to by her peers as a quiet and unnoticeable and that hey where totally unaware of her ambitions to create art. In this sense Salomon was wearing a Jungian mask. See: Sears A. Eldredge, Mask: Improvisation For Actor Training and Performance: The Compelling Image (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 13.
primitive influence of Nolde’s decapitated heads. For artists such as Salomon, the use of the mask, however, is not simply a stylistic choice, but one which delves into the human psyche.

The Expressionist nature of *Life? or Theater?* is also conveyed through Salomon’s color choices. In several depictions, Salomon smeared and mixed the hues so rapidly and intensely that the gouache colors have become brown and muddied—hues which Griselda Pollock has descriptively referred to as smears of “fecal contamination.”93 Salomon’s style was facilitated by various arbitrary colors for an emotive and evocative quality (Fig. 18). Two works that emphasize the influence of Expressionist color in Salomon’s depictions include *Self Portrait* of 1939-41 (Fig. 19) and a portrait of her husband, *Portrait of Alexander Nagler* of c.1939 (Fig. 20).

Unlike the somewhat veristic *Self Portrait* of 1940 (Fig. 21), the *Self Portrait* of 1939-41, is Salomon’s recognizable profile, but her mask like-face is green with red outlines and a blue “Shadow.”94 With the use of arbitrary color and quickened lines, it is clear that Salomon’s intention was not a depiction solely based on her visual features. Rather, it is about a deep psychological existence expressed through color. The incorporation of acidic greens and mask-like facial features further emphasizes Salomon’s familiarity with the Expressionists decades before her. Salomon uses the same approach in the portrait of her husband, Alexander Nagler. His face is constructed with hasty brushstrokes of greens, blues, and golden tones. The Expressionist color in these portraits reiterates Salomon’s preference for Expressionist techniques in *Life? Or Theater?* over the academic styles she had studied at the Vereinigte Staatsschulen.

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93 Pollock, “Theater of Memory,” 46.
94 *Portrait of Alexander Nagler, Self Portrait 1939-41,* and *Self Portrait* of 1940 are not part of *Life? or Theater?* Salomon gifted *Self Portrait 1939-41* to Ottilie Moore.
Alfred Wolfsohn and Music Theory

Salomon’s artistic training and her ability to convey her story through Expressionist forms became an even more powerful tool for catharsis as Salomon incorporated the musical theories of Alfred Wolfsohn. Wolfsohn was an enigmatic figure and vocal coach who encouraged Salomon to paint, and he inspired her expressive forms of catharsis.

Wolfsohn developed his vocal and movement theories in Berlin as a result of his own trauma. World War I left him with severe shell shock and horrific nightmares (Fig. 22).95 Unable to heal his trauma by existing treatments, Wolfsohn developed vocal theories based on a guttural nine-octave scale, which, when paired with deep-seated personal trauma, acted as a cathartic expression for both psychological and physical healing.96 Wolfsohn believed that as a vocalist, or student, sang in both male and female vocal ranges, clarity and peace would come through oral expulsion to those who suffered from horrific events (Fig. 23).97

Music and voice theory, and their roles on healing mental and physical elements, as well as their effect on human emotion are not unique to Wolfsohn. While these ideas likely originated with indigenous shaman and ancient civilizations, their role in the modern world became fodder for debate as early as the seventeenth-century.98 In 1688, Jean Baptiste Travernier wrote of ailing patients in Constantinople who were treated “in infirmaries with unpleasant vocal and instrumental music.”99 Nearly a century later in 1777, Jean-François de La Harp became wary of the physiological effects of opera, particularly criticizing the Armide, asserting that the

96 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
performance “harmed the emotions of the soul because it sounded like screams of pain.”

Experiments of singing and asylum patients, medical healing through music, and advancements in musical ethnology continued until the advent of World War I when music therapy became a distinctive tool in reducing shellshock related trauma.

Before the onslaught of WWI, Wolfsohn was already studying the attributes of the voice on the psyche, the color and range of the voice, and the benefits of singing for students with serious vocal problems in Berlin. However, it was not until Wolfsohn experienced the horrors of combat that he realized just how crucial his musical studies were. In writing the foundations of his practice, Wolfsohn recounted two specific events that were crucial for the development of his theoretical practices—two events that stood juxtaposed with one another in sweetness and in horror. The experiences took place years apart, but both were the result of extreme emotion as one moment was from his mother’s soothing bedtime story and the other from his horrific war experience.

One particularly intense and harrowing night during the war, Wolfsohn discovered the power of voice. In the middle of fighting a barrage of French troops on the Western Front, Wolfsohn was forced to abandon a fellow wounded soldier and stay under cover while he crawled and slithered his way into hiding. He wrote,

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100 Norton, 189.
101 Ibid., 191. Norton notes that music therapy started when music was used in post-WWI veteran’s hospitals as a way means of distraction of physiological pain. However, the interaction with and the creation of music “provided notable benefits to patients.”
102 Newham, The Singing Cure, 84. Wolfsohn explored vocal theories of both Freud and Jung. He hoped to have recognition directly from Jung. However, Jung’s secretary returned each letter to Wolfsohn. In London, on Monday July 24, 1961, Wolfsohn wrote a speech for the Jung Society. He was too ill too present it, but his beloved student, Roy Hart, presented it for him. This was the most recognition Wolfsohn received from the Jung school. See http://www.roy-hart.com/roy.lecture.htm.
103 Felstiner, To Paint Her Life, 50. The Western Front was originally Luxembourg and Belgium. Later this included areas of France.
The hours pass by. The firing and the danger are amplified, I run. I pray to God and that does not help me. Somewhere I hear a voice that screams: ‘Comrade! Comrade!’ I close my eyes in terror, thinking: ‘how is it possible that a human voice has the power to produce such sounds?’

It was this voice of a fellow soldier unceasingly echoing throughout his mind like an atrocious souvenir that provided the impetus for Wolfsohn’s finding peace through vocalization.

During the war Wolfsohn developed severe shellshock and upon his arrival home in Berlin, he began to further research the attributes of the voice. Inspired by, and unable to rid his mind of the fellow soldier calling out to him for help, Wolfsohn began to practice his own ideas of expelling deep and strange sounds—sounds that he attributed to part of the human vocal range. Inevitably, this led Wolfsohn to solidify his unwavering belief that the act of vocalization could, and would, heal psychological upsets and physical ailments. After the medical and psychological world failed to find relief for Wolfsohn’s fears, his own singing, guttural releases, and increased octave range brought the solace for which he was yearning. Wolfsohn wrote, “I am sure that it is possible for psychic injuries to cause the same bodily illness as physical ones…psychical [sic] bacilli undermine the body the same way as the real ones.” Wolfsohn’s practices were so effective they peaked interest of various laryngologists, biologists, and even various psychologists from the Jung school.

To practice the theories of Wolfsohn is to reach inside the darkness of the inner psyche, locate the un-pleasantries of the soul, and then, release them vocally—no matter how pleasing or

104 Ginsbourger, 19. Translated from French by Natalie Vaieland.
106 Existing recordings of Wolfsohn’s students participating in his singing theory have been digitized and can be found at http://www.folkways.si.edu/vox-humana-alfred-wolfsohns-experiments-in-extension-of-human-vocal-range/contemporary-electronic-science-nature-sounds/album/smithsonian.
108 Ginsbourger, 20. This included biologist Sir Julian Huxley, Laryngologist Paul Moses, and “the psychologists of the Jung School.”
ghastly they may sound to outside listeners.\textsuperscript{109} The point of the exercise is not necessarily to create audible beauty, but the vocal expulsion of festering emotions that resemble infectious bacteria, or what Wolfsohn called “psychical bacilli.” In reference to Wolfsohn’s practices and theories, Dr. Eric Weiser, of the journal \textit{Weltwoche}, wrote: “The main task is psychological: it is clear that resonance can be extended to the chest and head; one can sing the bones; but to do so, technique is not sufficient. There must also be an indefinable mental and spiritual strength...as it follows [Wolfsohn’s] path.”\textsuperscript{110} The undertaking of catharsis—through the voice or any other means—requires depth, strength, concentration and an acknowledgement that it is not merely a quick fix.

For Wolfsohn, the practice of singing as exorcism ran parallel to that of catharsis in Jungian psychology.\textsuperscript{111} However, instead of basing healing on conditions of interpretive symbols and archetypal images, Wolfsohn sought more conclusive results from the expulsion of sounds from deep within. Among the Jungian archetypes used is the “Shadow”—associated with the dark side of one’s personality or those things that a person is ashamed of or wants to hide. Wolfsohn agreed with Jung’s definition of the “Shadow.” Jung said: ““Shadow” personifies everything the subject refuses to acknowledge about himself.”\textsuperscript{112} A proponent of Wolfsohn, Paul Newham, described the “Shadow” in this manner:

\textsuperscript{109} Newham, \textit{The Singing Cure}, 89.
\textsuperscript{111} Paul Newham, \textit{Therapeutic Voicework: Principles and Practice for the Use of Singing as Therapy} (London: Jessica Kingsly Publishers, 1999), 334. Wolfsohn received some attention from psychologists of the Jung school. However, Wolfsohn was unable to full gain the respect of Jung himself.
The psychological concept of the “Shadow” corresponds to the aesthetic concept of ugliness. The “Shadow” is a constellation of images which constitute the darker, torrid perverse…part of the personality, and to it belong all those aspects of oneself which tend to remain disguised and hidden beneath the grace and manner of the persona, or the public face.113

Wolfsohn believed and taught that the “Shadow”, deep within a person’s psyche, needed to be exposed and addressed in order to heal. Singing, or vocal release, was a strong enough device to enter into the depths of the “Shadow” and expel its secrets.

For Salomon, the deep and internal contemplations of her “Shadow” were so large and secretive that she was not satisfied with limiting her process to exploring vocal catharsis. She acknowledged Wolfsohn’s theories and then applied it to her own emotional expulsion which required the multifaceted outlets of the Gesamtkunstwerk. It was with the combination of vocal release, obsessive painting, musical notations, cinematic influences, and written text, in Life? or Theater?, all together forming a Gesamtkunstwerk, that Salomon was able to work through her “Shadow” to find a sense of peace. This hallmark of the German Expressionists was the foundation on which Salomon stabilized and expressed her trauma and her sanity.

In addition to the Expressionist influences and her artistic training, Salomon consciously recalled the philosophies and teachings of Wolfsohn who was a family friend and vocal teacher that she first met in Berlin in 1937. While German Expressionism heavily influenced Salomon’s style, Salomon was inspired by Wolfsohn’s guidance as well. The combination and impact of these two forces on the young painter cannot be overlooked. Of the thirteen-hundred paintings in Life? or Theater?, there are nearly seven hundred depictions of the singing teacher, and Salomon conveys a deep attentiveness to the older Wolfsohn. His appearance in Life? or Theater? became an obsessive focus for Salomon.

113 Newham, The Singing Cure, 89.
Wolfsohn, the accomplished music theorist, was introduced to Salomon by her stepmother, Paula Lindberg-Salomon, and he frequently visited the Salomon home to coach Paula. It is unclear if the relationship between Wolfsohn and Salomon was more than platonic friendship, but it is clear that the two were close. Whether they were or were not lovers, it is apparent that Wolfsohn had a great influence on Salomon and her ability to express herself.

Wolfsohn saw great artistic potential in Salomon and encouraged her to paint. Their emotional connection is depicted in one of Salomon’s early images entitled Der Tod und das Mädchen c.1938 (Fig. 24). Salomon’s depiction of Death as a skeleton, embracing a woman was an image that Wolfsohn admired greatly. In a sequence of images in Life? or Theater?, Salomon depicted an exchange between herself and Wolfsohn, that was one based specifically on Der Tod und das Mädchen. In this episode Wolfsohn takes a keen interest in Salomon’s art and the two are depicted alone in a room of the Lindberg-Salomon residence. Wolfsohn is seated at a blue table and sifts through Salomon’s etchings and paintings. She asks which piece he would like (Fig. 25). Wolfsohn chooses an image The Meadow with Yellow Flowers (Fig. 26), but he desperately wants to lay claim to Der Tod und das Mädchen (Fig. 27). Salomon is hesitant, but agrees to let Wolfsohn borrow the image after he pleads with her, “I'd like to have Death and the...
Maiden, too. That is the two of us.” 117 With interactions such as this, Salomon was clearly aware of the interest that the older Wolfsohn had in her. 118

*Der Tod und das Mädchen* is indicative of the close and personal relationship of Wolfsohn and Salomon. 119 Yet, the connection between the two is further emphasized in Salomon’s understanding of the cathartic expression Wolfsohn employed in his musical theories. *Life? or Theater?* is much more reflective of Salomon’s emerging inner identity because it adds the energetic and complete process of Wolfsohn’s ideas. Although Wolfsohn was not a visual artist, his process of healing through guttural expulsion propelled Salomon’s own practice. Just as Salomon’s painting saved her, music theory was Wolfsohn’s tool for reconciling inner demons in order to carry on with his life.

**Salomon’s Catharsis**

It is clear that Salomon employed an obsessive approach to painting the works in *Life? or Theater?*, but there is no record of how many paintings she created each day. However, all of the paintings and accompanying texts were executed in eighteen months or just five hundred and forty-eight days. This means that on average, Salomon would have needed to produce two and a

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117 Jhm.nl, “*Life? or Theater?*.”
118 Ibid. Salomon’s image numbered 4604 reads, “Ich möchte gerne auch “Der Tod und das Mädchen haben. Das sin wir beide.” In an image depicting how deeply Salomon comprehends Wolfsohn teachings, she recounts the following alongside an image of Wolfsohn in pose similar to images of Jesus. “Meanwhile Charlotte is totally absorbed in her efforts to express in an etching [Wolfsohn’s] profound subconscious fascination for her. A man standing by the sea, surrounded by a group of young people. He is addressing them, and they are listening. In the background a youth of medium height points to his forehead.”
119 Ibid. Salomon is eager to incite the reaction Wolfsohn had to her pieces. From *Life? or Theater?*, Wolfsohn is depicted with the following, ““Here we see a young girl expressing two different spiritual states. In the first, a very striking depiction of ‘Death and the Maiden’, all is despair. In the second picture this soul suddenly finds some hope and courage to face life and expresses this in 'a meadow with yellow flowers.' ‘Death and the Maiden’ or 'The Meadow with Yellow Flowers': that is the completion of a circle. They are still so closely intertwined with themselves, these young girls. I believe I, too, am among those who so readily seduce themselves, and let themselves be seduced. I recently read an essay, ‘What is Art?’, in which a sixteen-year-old girl had the same thoughts as those expressed by a philosopher I greatly admire, I mean Nietzsche, in a poem called 'Venice'. Not long ago I stood in warm, brown night, etc. Lights, gondolas, music. My soul, a stringed instrument, plucked softly and invisibly, sang its own barcarole. Was there a listener there? In other words, conceiving the creation of art as nothing less than the creator's soul being touched from the outside.”
half paintings each day to finish within this time frame. The all-encompassing endeavor of constructing Life? or Theater?, would have completely consumed Salomon’s life in France for months on end. In doing so, she would have been fully engulfed in a process of intensely purging her own chaotic and emotional past.

Salomon emphasizes her story of trauma from the very beginning of Life? or Theater? with the suicide of her mother’s sister, also named Charlotte (Fig. 28). From there, Salomon moves in and out of various perspectives of the characters, the death of her mother, her grandmother’s attempted suicide and death, all while devoting a majority of images to Alfred Wolfsohn. It is only after the compounding traumas of the death of her grandmother, learning of her family history, and surviving Gurs, that Salomon was able to reflect on the immense influence of Wolfsohn in her life and also recount—and then apply—his teachings of the power of the voice in the retelling of her own events and emotional trauma in Life? or Theater?. The connection between Salomon and Wolfsohn is amplified to a greater degree due to the notations for the vocalized word within the storyline. Not only is Life? or Theater? visual, but Salomon, in essence, sung the words of her story to expel thoughts of madness and suicide. The vocal expulsion during her time of creation further suggests that her catharsis was based on Wolfsohn’s teachings.

Several paintings, near the beginning of Life? or Theater?, visually signify the hidden attributes of her story and secrets of her family. In one such piece, Salomon’s grandmother, Marianne Benda Grunwald, sits amid dark tones (Fig. 29). The soberness of the image emphasizes the fact that her daughter, Fränze, has just killed herself. Salomon depicted the elderly Mrs. Grunwald as a solitary and forlorn figure in a huddled mass who stares blankly at the floor. She is keeping the enormous secret from Salomon. However, the concealment of the
family secrets creates a “Shadow” within the household, this will ultimately affect Salomon through her adolescent years into her adult life.

The most telling depictions of Salomon’s unrealized “Shadow” are two consecutive, but unnumbered images of herself depicted as a young girl. In one image Salomon is portrayed as a small figure walking the length of the hallway in her grandparent’s home. She is troubled by a heavy feeling of despair produced by her suspicion of secrets, and their presence echoes throughout the halls (Fig. 30). The secret, in the form of a large and mangled skeleton infests the space in which Salomon lives. The associated text reads, “And whenever she has to walk alone the endless, wide, high, dark passage in her grandparents’ home, she imagines something terrible, with skeleton limbs, that has something to do with her mother. Then she is filled with panic and begins to run—run—run—until she finally locks herself in the bathroom and begins to ponder about life (Fig. 31).”120 On the next page the voice switches from the narrator to that of young Salomon saying, “So that’s what they call life” as she contemplatively sits on the edge of the tub, hiding from the “Shadow” in the hallway.121 Salomon’s accompanying narrations and her disenchanted remark elucidates the visual representation of the “Shadow” in these images.

These two passages, like those on nearly every page, are given a visual representation, a vocal declaration, and a tune by which to sing the narration. This approach lends itself to the vocalized exorcism that is linked directly to Wolfsohn’s teachings and his belief in the Jungian “Shadow”. Salomon’s own “Shadow”, manifested as a monstrous skeleton, chases her through her own darkness. The text of the narrator differs from the texts of each of the characters written in first-person in Life? or Theater?. The narrator is written in third person and its omniscient voice propels the story and adds contextual information for the reader. According to Salomon’s

120 Jhm.nl, “Life? or Theater?.”
121 Ibid. Translated by The Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam. See jhm.nl for translations of original German in Dutch and English.
specific musical notations, the voice of the narrator is to be sung in a variety of octaves, notes, or pitches. In the case of Salomon’s skeleton, the uttered phrases can be portrayed as horrific, terrified, or ominous depending on the type and degree of emotional catharsis. Salomon’s utterance, “so this is what they call life” would connote the release of childhood fears.

The image of Salomon in the hallway with the skeleton and the image of her hiding in the bathroom, are visual and vocal markers of her early acknowledgement of her personal “Shadow,” or dark spaces, and her own realization that she needed to address family secrets that had been haunting her. Salomon was not satisfied with maintaining a life in which the darkness was an issue, or as Jung put it, remaining “disguised and hidden beneath the grace and manner of the persona, or the public face.”

In acknowledging the “Shadow,” Salomon was able to reconcile her family’s suicide. To truly heal through his vocal process, Wolfsohn fully believed in and encouraged his students to get in touch with their own “Shadow.” Concerning Wolfsohn’s recognition of the “Shadow,” Newham wrote:

> Wolfsohn recognized that if the voice was to be employed as an expression of the true nature of the psyche in its entirety, it would have to establish a connection with the “Shadow.” This meant that the voice had to be permitted to yell, scream, sob, and give voice to the animalistic primal, preverbal utterances which are part of the rightful expression of the “Shadow.”

By adopting the practice of Wolfsohn’s vocal theory, Salomon employed both the visual and the vocal as a means of healing during the creation of Life? or Theater?.

Salomon prefaced Life? or Theater? with a description of how the work was conceived. While painting, a tune enters the mind of the artist. The joining of these two elements enables a work that is most complete. Salomon wrote:

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123 Newham, The Singing Cure, 53.
The creation of the following paintings is to be imagined as follows: A person is sitting beside the sea. He is painting. A tune suddenly enters his mind. As he starts to hum it, he notices that the tune exactly matches what he is trying to commit to paper. A text forms in his head, and he starts to sing the tune, with his own words, over and over again in a loud voice until the painting seems complete.\textsuperscript{124}

This process of creation meant that Salomon was engaged with vocal utterances and expulsions during the formation of \textit{Life? or Theater?}. Evidence of Salomon’s emersion in Wolfsohn’s vocal catharsis while painting is further emphasized in an account given by the Martha Pécher, the owner of the Hotel La Belle Aurore, where Salomon painted and lived. She recounted, “[Charlotte] painted all the time, always humming.”\textsuperscript{125} Salomon practiced what she prefaced in \textit{Life? or Theater?}, she painted, hummed a tune, and then sang the tune in a loud voice as words came to her mind until the painting was complete.

Among the massive collection of images, there is one specific painting in which Salomon wrote that a particular page was created “to the tune of” a certain song. Image 4701, depicts a physical encounter between Salomon and Wolfsohn and the caption is one of lust and excitement (Fig. 32).\textsuperscript{126} Salomon wrote, “But suddenly his hypersensitive nerves are touched by a fire-like current—which is natural considering that this picture was created to the tune of: I love you as no one has ever, ever, loved before!” Other musical notations within \textit{Life? or Theater?} indicate a tune by which the words are to be sung, however, here Salomon indicates that this particular tune was a catalyst during the time of its creation. The emphasis on the phrase “this picture was


\textsuperscript{125} Felstiner, \textit{To Paint Her Life}, 142. Pécher revealed this information in an interview by Gary Schwartz on September 27, 1981.

\textsuperscript{126} Jhm.nl, “\textit{Life? or Theater?}.” “[W]enn Man bedenkt das blattentstand unter der Melodie.” Salomon only numbered a portion of the paintings in \textit{Life? or Theater?}. The Jewish Historical Museum, which houses the collection, has numbered each piece as part of their cataloging system. Since none of the pieces are titled, I will be using the museums numbering system to identify the images. See http://www.jhm.nl/collection/specials/charlotte-salomon.
created to the tune of” indicates that not only was Salomon painting as cathartic expression, she was in fact, singing or engaged with the vocal utterances as she created this image. This further emphasizes that Salomon was practicing Wolfsohn’s theories while she immersed herself in psychological release and her own self-expression during the creation of Life? or Theater?.

Salomon and Wolfsohn: A Relationship

The relationship between Salomon and Wolfsohn is one that has been debated. Biographies on Wolfsohn lay claim to the idea that he never knew how Salomon felt about him and that he was shocked the first time he saw the representations of Salomon and himself as intimate lovers in Life? or Theater?. It is, however, well-established that Salomon painted Der Tod und das Mädchen specifically as a birthday present for Wolfsohn, who was twenty-eight years her elder, and who was engaged to be married to another woman. The small, tonal painting depicts a young girl encircled in the embrace of death and Wolfsohn acknowledged that it was a portrayal of Salomon and himself.

The Jungian theory of transference, applicable here, occurs when a given individual or patient divulges his or her secrets, wishes, or desires, and yields them up to the psychologist. This gives the psychologist a sense of power, authority, and connection to the patient. In transference, according to Jung, a deep bond is formed. It is then impossible for the patient to remain neutral toward the analyst or psychologist and vice versa—he or she will either love or hate the authority figure, but can, in no way, remain indifferent toward the one with this power. Similar to that of the analyst, Wolfsohn occupied a restorative role with his voice therapy as he

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connected his vocal techniques with Jungian theories, and he was a figure practicing healing.\textsuperscript{129} Therefore, he had the capacity to become a substitute for deity, a parent, or a lover.

While the images within \textit{Life? or Theater?} portraying Salomon and Wolfsohn are often sexual in nature, there is an underlying connection like that of an analyst and patient as Salomon used Wolfsohn’s techniques to convey and expunge previous traumatic events. The feeling of love or lust for Wolfsohn would exist as a romantic relationship and as an authoritarian or parental role and a submissive childlike role for Salomon. Transference is made possible as Wolfsohn takes the domineering role of an authority and as Salomon recounts her story using his theoretical practices of vocal exorcism.

Nonetheless, Salomon did not allow Wolfsohn to subject her to uncompromised control as a father figure. Through her repetitious depictions and the incorporation of Wolfsohn’s singing theories, Salomon controlled and demystified the enigmatic nature of Wolfsohn. With the help of his theories, Salomon found within herself the strength to combat her dark places as she created \textit{Life? or Theater?}. Wolfsohn wrote concerning his role as a teacher, “I am neither a sorcerer nor a hypnotist. I can only help my students overcome their inner tension to loosen the inhibitions that hold their personalities, as well as their voices, in chains. But the bulk of the work they must do themselves.”\textsuperscript{130} Wolfsohn encouraged Salomon to paint, but the labor and work had to be executed by Salomon. She painted the representations of Wolfsohn in an obsessive format as seen in the sheer number of times he is depicted in \textit{Life? or Theater?}.

\textsuperscript{129} Throughout Wolfsohn’s career he longed to win recognition from Jung himself. Wolfsohn wrote to Jung on multiple occasions regarding his exploration in vocal theory. Much to his dismay Jung never responded directly, correspondence with Wolfsohn was delegated to Jung’s secretary. See Sheila Braggins, \textit{Alfred Wolfsohn alias Amadeus Daberlohn: The Man and his Ideas}.

\textsuperscript{130} Marian E. Hampton and Barbara Acker, \textit{The Voice Vision: Views on Voice} (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Corporation, 1997), 197.
Salomon was one of Wolfsohn’s the many students who became enamored with his charismatic nature and vocal theory. Upon the occurrence of Wolfsohn’s death in 1996, One student, Marita Gunther, remarked on her deep feelings for Wolfsohn.\(^{131}\) She wrote, “I can do what no other writer or biographer can. I can describe what it was like to have known Alfred Wolfsohn, to have loved him, to have been taught by him” (Fig. 33).\(^{132}\) Gunther implies that to know Wolfsohn was to love him. Furthermore, as familiarity with the charismatic Wolfsohn blossomed, his female students often referred to him by his initials, A. W. pronounced in “Awe.”\(^{133}\) Such declarations of love and the assigning of an admiring nickname reaffirm the closeness of Wolfsohn’s relationships with his students.\(^{134}\) Like Salomon, other female pupils painted Wolfsohn’s image that encapsulated deep emotional ties with their teacher. However, other depictions are in homage to the vocal coach, rather than portraying a journalistic narrative.

Among Wolfsohn’s other young female students, Sheila Braggins and Jenny Johnson painted renditions of their vocal coach. In her version Braggins attempted a naturalistic portrait of Wolfsohn looking intently over his shoulder, and she carefully incorporated distinct features such as his full head of hair and unruly eyebrows (Fig. 34). The single depiction of Wolfsohn underscored her preoccupation with the life of her teacher.\(^{135}\) Painting, writing, singing, and speaking of Wolfsohn also became the focus of Braggins’ work.\(^{136}\)

\(^{131}\) Hampton and Acker, 197. Upon the outbreak of WWII, Wolfsohn fled to England. It is there that Gunther became his student.


\(^{133}\) A. W. being Wolfsohn’s initials, pronounced in German as “Ah Vay.” See http://www.roy-hart.com/experience1.htm.

\(^{134}\) Gunther, Overture to The Prophet of Song, vii. Gunther notes that upon their first meeting Wolfsohn asked her to call him Awe. The nickname Awe was based on Wolfsohn’s initials, A. W. “which spoken in German are Ah-We.”


\(^{136}\) Braggins worked with and studied Wolfsohn’s teachings and his biography until her death on September 25, 2014.
Other students of Wolfsohn expressed deep emotional responses to his teachings and to his commanding presence. Jenny Johnson was a student of Wolfsohn’s who studied at the same time as Braggins. Upon visiting Wolfsohn’s studio with her sister, Johnson was enamored with Wolfsohn’s charismatic nature and his ability to command his students (Fig. 35). At the time of this encounter, Johnson was a young art student and was so moved by Wolfsohn that she returned to her class and painted an image of her visit (Fig. 36). Johnson recounted, “I attempted to show a strong contact or a flow of power from Awe to [my sister] Jill.” In writing about her experience with Wolfsohn, Johnson expressed her process as visual representation of an event in synesthesia. She wrote, “I transformed the sound into expressions of form, color, and light.” The influence of Wolfsohn, as represented in Johnson’s painting, is comparable to Salomon’s, as he was an enigmatic figure who prompted artistic exploration in his young students. In Wolfsohn’s unpublished transcript, Die Stimme, his long-time pupil, Marita Gunther, described the effects of Wolfsohn’s teachings as such:

He taught us pupils to take ourselves seriously. He taught us to bring art into life, and life into art, knowing very well, that art without love, is like an empty shell. And that love, if it is not integrated into constant repetition, in the creation of rituals, in the ability to bear pain, all that what theatre could mean, is but a sensation.

As with Johnson, Gunther, and Braggins, the ability to bear pain and the idea of “constant repetition” were two of Wolfsohn’s points that Salomon adapted for her own creation.

Salomon’s portrayal of Alfred Wolfsohn occurs in three distinct types in Life? or Theater? which appear over and over. The first is a depiction of the singing coach in a portrait-

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137 Braggins, The Mystery Behind the Voice, 149.
138 Ibid.
139 Ibid., 150.
140 Braggins, The Mystery Behind the Voice, 150.
141 English title is The Voice.
142 roy-hart.com/marita.htm
like manner that clearly conveys the features and aura of Wolfsohn—a kind of respectable and sympathetic representation (Fig. 37). The second is a version that is painted swiftly and often in scenes of either rampant psychological divulgences or romantic encounters between Wolfsohn and Salomon (Fig. 38). His figure, lying on his back with his hands under his head, is painted with quick and impetuous brushstrokes. At times, his face is discernable and in other depictions the figure is merely a streak of color which becomes recognizable as Wolfsohn due to its frequent appearance in *Life? or Theater?*. The third and most common representation is the depiction of disembodied heads lined in rows on a single page (Fig. 39). Each phantom cranium, often looking like a mask, is labeled with texts appointed by Salomon that accompany the inner thoughts and internal dialogues of Wolfsohn.

Wolfsohn longed to improve his vocal range and his ability to intensely express his emotions—to exorcise extreme sounds. After failed attempts to find vocal coaches to satisfy this desire, Wolfsohn had to look within himself. As a small boy, he fondly remembered a lullaby his mother would sing, an experience that brought him much joy. His heart would fill with glee, as his mother would sing in the voice of male and female characters. The idea of a human voice that could produce two extremes delighted Wolfsohn as a young child.\(^{143}\) “The small boy laughed when his mother would sing: the crystalline voices of angels from a girlish voice and then would switch to the laughter of deep bass of St. Peter in the voice of a man.”\(^{144}\) It is within Salomon’s portrayal of the disembodied ghost-like heads of Wolfsohn that Salomon explicitly conveys these ideas of the voice as a gender-neutral entity. He believed that the voice can and should embody both the traditionally appointed feminine and masculine vocal ranges. Likewise,

\(^{143}\) Ginsbourger, 20.
\(^{144}\) Ibid. Translated from French by Natalie Vaieland.
Salomon depicted Wolfsohn transitioning in and out of traditionally masculine and feminine traits.  

Early in his career, Wolfsohn established that release and catharsis required a deep range of vocalizations in order to be effective. By the 1930’s he implemented scales by which the student would begin in a low base and nasal tone and work his or her way up through a series of notes until the shrieking of an unattainable high note became almost inaudible. Wolfsohn began training his voice a little higher and a little lower each day, fueled by the belief that there “exists a universal human voice of much broader circumference than has hitherto been imagined.” With a greater breadth of vocalization there is also a greater space for a more extensive array of emotional catharsis.

In Life? or Theater? Salomon conveyed Wolfsohn’s ideas of the human voice as both masculine and feminine with page after page of painted disembodied heads. The first Wolfsohn heads Salomon portrayed at the beginning of each cycle are shown with a face that is identifiable by its physical attributes. As the paintings and the dialogues progress from line to line and head to head, the faces, and their distinct characteristics, begin to lose form. In this, the representations of Wolfsohn move back and forth between feminine and masculine attributes with softer cheekbones or the squaring of the jaw. Just as his singing theory denotes the shift between gender, Salomon captures the same concept in a visual representation of the theorist with the shift in gendered features. It is often only by reading the text that the viewer is able to identify who is specifically represented.

The transition and embodiment of the masculine and feminine is seen in two images from Life? or Theater?, in which Salomon has captured moments in which Wolfsohn is discussing

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145 Braggins, The Mystery Behind the Voice, 163.
146 Newham, The Singing Cure, 90.
certain parts of his theory (Fig. 40). The disembodied heads speak of his fascination with the dual-sexed features of specific singers. The initial figure in the top left resembles Wolfsohn with his wild hair and intent eyes. As he continues to speak, each representation develops new masculine or feminine attributes. The next face has larger, pursed lips. The following has a slenderer jaw-line, accentuated eyes, and a more feminine coif. This progresses as his eyes become shadowed and lashed, and as his chin becomes slender. Occasionally Salomon returns to the portrayal of Wolfsohn with traditional masculine attributes, such as the squaring of the jaw and large, dark bushy eyebrows (Fig. 41). The feminizing and de-feminizing of Wolfsohn peaks when the corresponding dialogue recounts how Wolfsohn saw this transition in the everyday, it reads: “When the woman with narrow hips bears womanish sons,” to accentuate his fascination with the juxtaposition of gender characteristics. In Wolfsohn’s theory, males could be feminine and females could be masculine without any social or political repercussion.

Salomon’s depiction of Wolfsohn’s longwinded declaration continues on for seven additional pages. Each page contains up to twenty phantom-like heads in various states. Every head is outlined in dark blue and includes textual narration sometimes placed beneath the image, and at other times to the side or on top of the heads. At the end of a lengthy statement, Wolfsohn appears again as a representation of his masculine self where he claims that the fusion of the sexes is the highest level of artistic expression and it is, “the prerequisite for the subsequent creation of an individual with a unique artistic gift.” Salomon also uses this technique to portray herself.

In Life? or Theater? Salomon details events that took place just before the death of her grandmother and begins to employ the same technique of shifting genders in the representation

147 Jhm.nl, “Life or Theater?.”
148 Ibid.
of herself as a caretaker and teacher. In a failed attempt to overdose on opium, Salomon’s grandmother is bed ridden and put under constant supervision. Salomon believes that by recounting and teaching Wolfsohn’s theories and that she has the ability to help her grandmother overcome her internal demons through painting and vocalization, thus she becomes the teacher, just as Wolfsohn’s theories had aided her. In the subsequent scenes, Salomon depicts herself as moving from feminine to genderless to masculine—recounting what she learned, understood, and invoked, through the practices of dual-gender capabilities taught by Wolfsohn. Furthermore, Salomon’s depiction of herself as transitional in gender conveys her ability to inhabit both male and female spheres, as an embodiment of Wolfsohn’s vocal teachings. By portraying herself as such, Salomon is linking her ability to expel her inner darkness on the same level as her teacher.

In a sequence of pages, Salomon sits on the edge of her grandmother’s bed. The figures are slightly abstracted, but the viewer can decipher the figures of both Salomon and her grandmother (Fig. 42). This visual recognition begins to shift into deeper abstraction. Salomon still sits on the edge of her grandmother’s bed as the old woman lies with her hair neatly tucked behind her (Fig. 43). While it is clear the figure in the bed is that of her grandmother, Salomon transitions into a representation of a blue curved figure without any real gender attribute except for a matted patch of short brown hair. The viewer recognizes the depiction as Salomon from the dialogue noted on the page. She writes: “There, grandma, you see? You’re already feeling much better!”

On the opposing page Salomon has reduced the portrayal of herself to an even more abstracted figure (Fig. 44). The c-shaped body, sitting on the edge of the bed is both faceless and genderless and stands in stark contrast with the feminine depiction of the grandmother with a messy pile of long hair on her head. Like the previous images of Wolfsohn, Salomon transitions from a gendered or genderless form back into a more recognizable image of herself, until she

149 Jhm.nl, “Life or Theater?.”
fades into a mere outline. In the moment she is neither male nor female; she is teaching, and for Salomon, it is a genderless endeavor.

In the middle of this progression is a pair of opposing images that duplicate the depictions of Wolfsohn’s dis-embodied heads (Fig. 45). The thirty-two repetitious and continual-narrative profiles are hairless and are void of specific facial features—again the reader knows it is Salomon because of the textual notations. The pink flesh tones in the depictions of Salomon’s disembodied head move to yellows and dark pinks, as her representation becomes a male-like figure. The pages conclude with Salomon’s slow transition back to a more recognizable feminine form with rouged lips and accentuated eyelashes. By depicting herself in the same manner as Wolfsohn, Salomon is illustrating the idea that she saw herself as Wolfsohn’s equal.

This series of disembodied Salomon heads is the only one of its kind depicting the artist in Life? or Theater?. Its placement comes in the story just as Salomon has begun to dabble in her own painting process—and therefore her own course of healing. While dialogue associated with Wolfsohn’s disembodied heads was focused on his singing technique, the continuous heads of Salomon speak to the expressive and cathartic attributes of writing and painting. Salomon has depicted herself in this way with phantom-like heads and as transitional-gendered characters because of the influence of Wolfsohn’s teachings. Just as he was a theorist of catharsis through music and vocalization, Salomon was a proponent of healing through painting and writing. As a result, she was able to embody both the feminine and the masculine in her self-expression. With this synthesis Salomon was able to create a space in Life? or Theater? in which she could explore Wolfsohn’s cathartic practices and give them a visual form. She has become more than a young girl dependent upon Wolfsohn. She was an equal with the ability to relieve internal pain. Salomon embodies Wolfsohn’s teachings and his charismatic nature to become emotionally and
psychologically whole. She learned of Wolfsohn’s theories, employed them in the creation of *Life? or Theater?*, and then became a teacher of cathartic exercise.

**Conclusion**

Salomon’s traumatic life was the catalyst for the exploration and expression of her inner turmoil and family suffering. By using song, text, and painting as a means for catharsis in *Life? or Theater?*, Salomon’s work also references the Expressionist and psychoanalytical influences around her in a vast *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Using the theories of Alfred Wolfsohn, Salomon confronted and expelled her inner “Shadow,” vocalized her trauma, and visually released her feelings toward Wolfsohn. This is seen in the transition from the obsessive depictions of Salomon and Wolfsohn as male, female, and non-gendered. And while Wolfsohn’s charisma was attractive to many women, Salomon was able to engage with this obsession for her own benefit. Through her art, Salomon had become Wolfsohn’s equal in her own cathartic process of finding inner peace.

Upon the completion of *Life? or Theater?*, Salomon returned to Nice until her grandfather died, and then married Alexander Nagler. When Salomon married, her life had taken a turn for the better. She had finished her work of catharsis, was living in a picturesque city which she loved, and had found comfort and companionship in Nagler.\(^{150}\) Their wedding was a small event at the Nice Town Hall.\(^{151}\) Her friend and former neighbor in l’Ermitage, Emil Straus, attended the nuptial celebration and remarked that Salomon looked happy, highlighting Salomon’s state of wellbeing. About their wedding Straus noted, “Nagler had procured a suckling kid for their wedding breakfast at l’Ermitage. [The] faithful housekeeper had set a magnificent table with company china and silverware. All were in high spirits. Charlotte looked

\(^{150}\) Felstiner argues that Salomon and Nagler married because Salomon was pregnant and that it would have been much safer if the pair had remained unmarried.

\(^{151}\) Felstiner, *To Paint Her Life*, 170.
fresh and happy.” Salomon, now married and pregnant, was the same person who had lived through sexual abuse, internment at Gurs, and suicides of beloved family members, but now she looked happy. This new expression and outlook was made possible through creation of Life? or Theater?. However, Salomon’s newly found joy and stability were not to be permanent.

In 1943, tensions between Jews and Adolf Hitler’s Waffen-Schutzstaffel (The SS) escalated in the South of France. In early September of that year, SS Officer Alois Brunner, ordered the roundup and the detention of all Jewish residents in and around Nice. On September 24, 1943, Brunner issued a list of Jews who were to be captured and detained; on that list were the names: Nagler, Alexander; Nagler née Salomon, Charlotte. Salomon’s detention came without warning. Straus recalled that the housekeeper of l’Ermitage heard a truck pull up one minute and Salomon screaming the next. It was Salomon’s marriage license which gave away the couple’s hiding place. Both signed the license with their real Jewish names, therefore declaring their Jewry and documenting their residence in VillaFranche-sur-Mer—hence, they were no longer able to hide from The SS.

On this September day of 1943, Brunner’s men took Salomon and Nagler, along with many others, to the Excelsior Hotel in Nice. The luxury hotel served as Brunner’s office and as a hotel turned prison for his Jewish captives. On the same day as their capture, Salomon, Nagler, and fifty others were forced to march through the streets of Nice to the train station where a train was awaiting to take them to a transit camp known as Drancy on the outskirts of Paris. Salomon and Nagler arrived in Drancy and into the SS state on the 27th September. The

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152 Felstiner, To Paint Her Life, 170.
153 Ibid., 182.
154 Ibid., 183.
155 Ibid., 187.
156 Ibid, 188.
157 Ibid., 189.
two entered the large barracks through entryway 19 and where registered and searched as a pair; Nagler was assigned number 5570 and Salomon 5571. They remained at Drancy, living in barracks separated by gender for nine days.

Buses arrived at Drancy on October 7, 1943 to shuttle the prisoners to Bobigny-Paris train station for their final train ride. From there, one thousand Jews including Salomon and Nagler were forced onto train transport number 60, bound for Auschwitz-Birkenau, Poland. The conditions of the train cars were deplorable with little space, a sparse food supply, and one small bucket for a latrine. The trip from Paris to Poland took three days and three nights, arriving at Auschwitz at about three o’clock a.m. on October 10, 1943.

At Auschwitz, Salomon, Nagler, and the other passengers were separated by gender. Nagler was sent to the work camp, Block 55, with the tattooed identification number 157166. Salomon was separated into a group of other expectant mothers. The SS officers and doctors lied to the newly arriving pregnant women, who posed the threat of propagating the Jewish race, with promises of lighter workloads and more and better food. Salomon, like so many others, confessed her pregnancy. She was murdered that same day, October 10th, 1943, within hours of her arrival. Nagler was murdered at Auschwitz on January 1, 1944.

Tragically, the life of stability and peace that Salomon had created for herself with the completion of Life? or Theater?, was taken away by her death in Auschwitz. The young woman who figured out how to live was murdered. Yet, left behind in VillaFranche-sur-Mer, was

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159 Felstiner, To Paint Her Life, 193-5.
160 Ibid 199.
161 Ibid., 198.
162 Ibid., 201.
163 Ibid., 202.
164 Ibid., 203.
165 Ibid., 207.
167 Felstiner, To Paint Her Life, 203.
Salomon’s vast collection of gouache paintings. Salomon left *Life? or Theater?* in the care of a dear friend, Dr. Moridis, who, in 1946, returned the compilation to Ottilie Moore, to whom the work was dedicated. In 1947, at the end of WWII, Salomon’s father, Albert Salomon, and his wife, Paula Lindberg-Salomon, travelled to Nice to try to find some trace of their daughter’s life. It was then that Moore presented to them the wrapped bundles containing *Life? or Theater?*. They returned to Amsterdam with the collection and it is now housed in the Archive of the Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam.

In a 1963 interview for *Pariser Journal*, Albert Salomon and Lindberg-Salomon, discussed their surprise at finding Salomon’s creation of such a large, colorful work. A creation of which they were unaware. Lindberg-Salomon was particularly moved by Salomon’s work and commented on how recognizable Salomon’s depictions of her were. The interviewer then takes a different approach to the conversation by asking if they believed that Salomon was aware of how little time she had left, particularly because of the hurried nature of many of the images. Lindberg-Salomon answered, “That’s what makes this so incredibly tragic. You can see in them that she looked death in the eye.” Salomon did look death in the eye, but her observations pertain to her presumably inevitable suicide. While one can read *Life? or Theater?* in the context of Nazi occupied Europe, there was no way that Salomon could have predicted her own demise. It is then important to read *Life? or Theater?* as a journey of self-discovery and of healing rather than an omen or a prediction of murder at the hands of Nazi powers.

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168 Jhm.nl, “Biography.”
169 Ibid.
170 “Interview,” Jewish Historical Museum, last modified 2009, accessed February 16, 2016, http://www.jhm.nl/collection/specials/charlotte-salomon/cs-interview. The interview was for a television show of Georg Stefan Troller and was conducted in German with English subtitles.
171 Ibid.
Despite Salomon’s tragic death at Auschwitz, *Life? or Theater?*, is a work that dispelled thoughts of suicide through catharsis, healing, and self-actualization. Through the use of Expressionistic frantic painting, expulsive vocal releases, and the theories of Alfred Wolfsohn, Salomon created a work of peace and security while living on Cote d’Azur. She had to find, for herself, whether she was going to choose life or death. Her choice was life. In the 1963 interview for *Pariser Journal*, Lindburg-Salomon was asked about Salomon’s outlook. Interviewer: “Did she love life?” Lindberg-Salomon answered: “Yes, very much so. And she rediscovered it time and time again.” Salomon loved life so deeply that she was willing to work through and express all of her trauma, pain, and disconnection to create the kind of life in which she could find happiness.
Figure 1. Charlotte Salomon. Cf. 4289. 1940-2. Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam.
Figure 2. Paula Lindberg-Salomon. Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam.
Figure 3. Vereinigte Staatsschulen für Freie und Angewandte Kunst. c. 1930. Postcard image.
Figure 4. Charlotte Salomon. *Illustration for a fairy tale, Nobleman on a Horse*, ca.1938. Private Collection.
Figure 5. Charlotte Salomon. *Illustration for a fairy tale, Dancing Characters* ca. 1938. Private Collection.
Figure 6. Charlotte Salomon. Cf. 4337. 1940-2. Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam.
Figure 7. Emil Nolde. *Doppelbildnis*. 1937. Private Collection.
Figure 9. Charlotte Salomon with Dr. and Mrs. Grunwald in Nice, France. c. 1938. Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam.
Figure 11. Ottilie Moore, seated center, with family. c.1940. Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam.
Figure 12. Charlotte Salomon. Cf. 4861 V. 1940-2. Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam.
Figure 13. Charlotte Salomon. Cf. 4174. 1940-2. Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam.
Figure 14. Emil Nolde. *In a Night Bar*, 1911. Oslo National Gallery. Oslo, Norway.
Figure 17. Charlotte Salomon. Cf. 4406. 1940-2. Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam.
Figure 18. Charlotte Salomon. Cf. 4578 V. 1940-2. Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam.
Figure 22. Alfred Wolfsohn. c. 1917. Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam.
Figure 23. Alfred Wolfsohn with his student Roy Hart. c.1950. Roy Hart Centre Artistique International Roy Hart.
Figure 25. Charlotte Salomon. 5505. 1940-2. Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam.
Figure 26. Charlotte Salomon. 4600 from *Life? or Theater?*. 1940-2. Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam.
Figure 27. Charlotte Salomon. Cf 4656 and 4978 from Life? or Theater?. 1940-2. Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam.
Figure 28. Charlotte Salomon. 4181. 1940-2. Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam.
Figure 29. Charlotte Salomon. 4182. Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam.
Figure 30. Charlotte Salomon. 4189. c.1940-2. Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam.
Figure 31. Charlotte Salomon. 4190. c. 1940-2. Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam.
Figure 32. Charlotte Salomon. 4701. c. 1940-2 Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam.
Figure 33. Alfred Wolfsohn with Marita Gunther. 1950's. roy-hart.com.
Figure 34. Sheila Braggins. *Alfred Wolfsohn*. 1962. Private Collection.
Figure 35. Alfred Wolfsohn and Jill Johnson with Jenny Johnson painting. ca 1953. Roy-hart.com.
Figure 37. Charlotte Salomon. 4463. c. 1940-2. Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam.
Figure 38. Charlotte Salomon. 4534. c. 1940-2. Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam.
Figure 39. Charlotte Salomon. 4611. c. 1940-2. Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam.
Figure 40. Charlotte Salomon. 4481 and 4482. c. 1940-2. Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam.
Figure 41. Charlotte Salomon. 4489. c. 1940-2. Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam.
Figure 42. Charlotte Salomon. 4857. c. 1940-2. Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam.
Figure 43. Charlotte Salomon. 4867. c. 1940-2. Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam.
Figure 44. Charlotte Salomon. 4868. c. 1940-2. Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam.
Figure 45. Charlotte Salomon. 4475 and 4876. c. 1940-2. Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam.


